

**Backing the Saudis in Yemen is right, strategically and morally**

By Evelyn Gordon

jns.org

January 30, 2019

**Horrible as Riyadh's behavior is, the Houthis are worse. Thus by ending support for the Saudi coalition, American would empower an even greater evil.**

An expert report submitted to the U.N. Security Council this month concluded that Iran is illegally funding Yemen's Houthi rebels by giving them oil, which they can sell for cash. From last year's version of the same report, we learned that Iran is arming the Houthis with missiles and drones, in violation of a U.N. arms embargo. Thus whatever the Houthis were when the war started, they are now effectively an Iranian subsidiary, dependent on Tehran for both cash and arms.

U.S. President Donald Trump speaks with Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia Mohammad bin Salman during their meeting at the White House on March 14, 2017. Credit: Official White House Photo by Shealah Craighead.

That is just one of many reasons to be appalled by the Senate's renewed effort to end U.S. support for the Saudi-led fight against the Houthis. Not only is this strategically idiotic, but it contradicts the Senate's own stated goal of protecting human rights. And the legislation reintroduced this week sends a terrible message, even if a presidential veto will presumably keep it from becoming law.

On the strategic side, let's start with the fact that an organization whose official slogan is "God is Great, Death to America, Death to Israel, Curse the Jews, Victory to Islam" isn't one Americans should want ruling anything, much less a country whose location enables it to dominate a strategic waterway vital to the global oil industry. And without the Saudi-led coalition, the Houthis would long since have taken over Yemen. In other countries, like Syria and Lebanon, Iranian military and financial aid has repeatedly enabled its proxies to overwhelm the opposition; that this hasn't yet happened in Yemen is only because there, unlike in Syria and Lebanon, the Saudi coalition has provided its local allies with substantial assistance, including airstrikes.

Second, empowering allies is always better than empowering enemies. Granted, Saudi Arabia a highly imperfect ally, but it is at least nominally in America's camp. Iran, in contrast, has been America's avowed enemy since 1979, and its proxies have been responsible for hundreds, if not thousands, of American deaths in Lebanon and Iraq. Thus for the Senate to weaken Riyadh and strengthen Tehran, which targeting the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen does, would be foolish at any time.

But it's especially foolish at a time when America ostensibly seeks to exert maximum pressure on Iran to

curb its multifarious bad behavior—its nuclear program, about which it has repeatedly lied; its ballistic-missile program, which defies a U.N. Security Council resolution; its regional aggression, which has already enabled it to dominate Lebanon, Syria and Iraq; and its terrorism, including recent attacks in the heart of Europe.

Maximum pressure requires both financial and military components, as the case of the Soviet Union shows. It was America's massive military buildup under Ronald Reagan, combined with its proxy war against the Soviets in Afghanistan, which made Moscow's military adventurism too expensive for its ailing economy to support.

Iran, like the Soviet Union, has a weak economy, which has been further undermined by America's reinstatement of stringent sanctions. Yet the economic pressure will be multiplied if Iran has to keep pouring resources into its numerous proxy wars rather than being able to win them cheaply.

Israeli airstrikes on Iranian targets in Syria obviously further this effort, since Iran must keep replacing what Israel destroys. But the Saudi coalition in Yemen is similarly forcing Iran to keep expending resources on a war it thought would be easily won. Thus if Washington is serious about countering Tehran and doesn't want to risk American troops in the process, supporting regional allies who are bleeding Iran is the only alternative.

Still, how can America possibly support a coalition that's committing gross human-rights violations in Yemen? The answer is easy: Horrible as Riyadh's behavior is, the Houthis are worse. Thus by ending support for the Saudi coalition, American would empower an even greater evil.

A perfect example is the issue of child soldiers. The New York Times ran a front-page story last month accusing the Saudis of using Sudanese child soldiers in Yemen. Though it didn't provide many hard numbers, it implied that there could well be several thousand such soldiers. This is incontrovertibly bad.

But what the Times carefully concealed from its readers is that the Saudis' use of child soldiers pales before that of the Houthis. According to an Associated Press report earlier that month, the Houthis openly admit to employing a whopping 18,000 child soldiers.

Moreover, while the Saudis are taking boys aged 14 to 17, the Houthis are using children as young as 10. And while the Saudis are recruiting their impoverished volunteers by offering pay sufficient to make their families permanently self-supporting (assuming the returning veterans invest it, as most do, in profit-making ventures like cattle or shops), the Houthis use other tactics: They

kidnap children outright, coerce them to enlist in exchange for a relative's freedom from jail, or force poor parents to choose between "volunteering" their child and making an unaffordable cash contribution to the war effort. Parents who resist are shot.

In short, bad as the Saudis' human-rights violations are, the Houthis' violations are far worse. And by ending support for the Saudi coalition, the Senate would consign Yemen to the barbarous rule of those very same Houthis. Given that both strategic and moral considerations mandate backing the Saudi coalition, why is the Senate set on doing the opposite? Perhaps it's due to sheer ignorance: Iran's useful idiots in the media, like The New York Times, do their best to amplify every Saudi atrocity while

downplaying Houthi atrocities. Or perhaps it's the clean hands syndrome: Senators don't care what horrors befall the Middle East as long as their hands are clean. But neither is acceptable behavior for national policy-makers, whose job is to gather accurate information and then, if there are no good options, choose the lesser evil.

In Yemen, the lesser evil is clearly backing the Saudi coalition. This would not only further America's strategic goals at minimal cost (the U.S. contribution consists of intelligence sharing, midair refueling and arms sales), but would be preferable to a Houthi victory from a human-rights standpoint. That the Senate has opted instead to further Iran's regional domination project is a disgrace.

*Ms. Gordon is a journalist and commentator living in Israel.*

## Stuck Between Its Two Sponsors Iran and Qatar, Hamas Loses Influence at Home

By Hillel Frisch

jpost.com

February 2, 2019

**Most likely, only those on its payroll show up for its rallies.**

The photos – and even more so the videos – of Hamas's 31st anniversary commemoration in Katiba Square in Gaza evoke vivid impressions of a vibrant, extremely popular movement after 11 years of rule over the Gaza Strip.

No doubt, the event was impressive, not least because the Israeli Air Force knocked out al-Aqsa's broadcasting site in November during the largest flare up to date since the 2014 campaign. Hamas proved that it could broadcast live despite the site's destruction, just as the event itself showed no small measure of organizational efficiency.

Women and men were separated by a cordon of Hamas officials in military dress and yellow vests. Green flags were plentiful and the deep podium was impressively adorned. The speeches and the skits – one of which featured an Israeli soldier cowering under his guards – were well-orchestrated. In short, the event proceeded like clockwork, even Swiss, in its precision.

Yet, the event teaches very little about the popularity of Hamas as events in Maidan al-Tahrir in Cairo reminded us. The massive crowds that assembled there before and during former Egyptian president Muhammad Morsi's reign seemed to reflect the popular will and demonstrate that the demonstrators had won hands down against the Egyptian military and the "deep" state supporting it – the legal, economic and clerical bureaucracies that have run Egypt since 1952.

The decisive military comeback reflected by Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's assumption of the presidency and the imprisonment of Morsi demonstrated the dangers of drawing political conclusions from crowds in leading squares.

The problem largely boils down to simple arithmetic. The dimensions of al-Tahrir Square could only hold a maximum of 350,000 people (I calculated this with the help of Google maps). Even with overflowing nearby streets, the crowd never exceeded half-a-million

demonstrators – approximately 1% of the adult population of Egypt. In retrospect, most of the 99% who didn't demonstrate, over the long term, failed to support "the revolution." The proof is that during the showdown, the Muslim Brotherhood could not mobilize large numbers to oppose the military counter-revolution.

The same can be said regarding Hamas.

To begin with, Hamas refrained from holding its commemoration in Gaza's largest square – the Square of the Unknown Soldier – choosing instead the smaller "Sahat al-Katiba al-Khudara" near the Islamic University, a Hamas stronghold, with 21,000 square meters, compared to over 60,000 sq.m. for the former.

Specialists in traffic flow – usually engineers by training – point to a two-person-by-square-meter measure as the high end threshold of crowd safety. A density exceeding that can only be achieved by professional troops in military formation.

Now, compare these pictures with the photos of the event. Clearly, the number of those participating in the commemoration event could not have exceeded 42,000 – less than 3% of Gaza's adult population. (Note also the deep podium that reduces the number of square meters left for the demonstrators considerably).

The number attending also explains why Hamas chose the smaller square. The shadow (and real) Hamas government has on its payroll 51,000 military and civilian employees, many of whom are beneficiaries of the \$30 million in cash from Qatar distributed in Gaza. They were bound to show up having not been paid (half) of their salaries since May (40% on the payroll) and June of last year for the remainder, according to official announcements. Hamas has not paid full salaries since early 2014, after el-Sisi closed down most of the smuggling tunnels.

Rest assured that these employees returned part of the money they received to Hamas to organize the event. These employees, as reluctant as they might have been to part with precious cash, no doubt realized that Qatar

provided these funds because of Hamas's feud with the Palestinian Authority, as part of the feud closer to home between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, rather than on humanitarian grounds. There are far needier Gazans than Hamas employees.

The crucial question is whether the organization will privilege meeting the needs of its bureaucracy, and thus be

allowed to be "tamed" to keep the peace, or stick to the path of aggression it renewed in April 2018, with the March of Return processions.

The answer lies probably in the middle with Qatar – which wants a tamer, but independent Hamas – and Iran, which wants bloodshed on Israel's southern front. The problem is that Hamas needs the financial aid of both.

## Benjamin Netanyahu and the looking-glass world of Israeli politics

By David Gardner

ft.com

January 30, 2019

**The Israeli premier will look for ways to burnish his rightwing credentials ahead of elections.**

Israeli elections are always raucous, no-holds-barred affairs. The long run-up to the general election due in April is no exception. An early highlight is that rivals of Benjamin Netanyahu, widely thought the most rightwing prime minister in Israel's history, are trying to outflank him from the right.

Israel-watchers who recall the 2015 elections will remember that Mr Netanyahu, in the final nail-biting days of the contest, almost lurched off the spectrum. His rightwing Likud party seemed happy with his overt rejection of a Palestinian state and histrionic bellicosity towards Iran. But challenged by a centre-left alliance, and to siphon off votes from his competitors on the ultranationalist and religious far-right, he launched into an incendiary final furlong. In particular, he shamelessly used dog-whistle racism to paint Israeli Arabs as a threat to the state.

He won. And, in the face of a barrage of corruption charges that could test to destruction his attested record as a survivor, he desperately needs to win again.

Mr Netanyahu's current critics and sometime allies are saying he is soft on Hamas, the Palestinian Islamist movement that controls the Gaza Strip, which it seized in 2007 after a brief civil war with Fatah, the mainstream nationalist party. Since then it has fought three wars with Israel — the last, longest and most destructive in 2014.

Avigdor Lieberman, the champion of Jewish settlement on Arab land who resigned as defence minister last year over Mr Netanyahu's Gaza policy, says Israel is being defeated by Hamas because of concessions including a deal with Qatar allowing Doha to pay the salaries of the Hamas administration to maintain stability in Gaza. Naftali Bennett, a former Netanyahu education minister and head of the irredentist Jewish Home party, has founded an even more ultra party, The New Right, and called for the assassination of Hamas leaders.

More surprising for some Israelis, who yearn for a new incarnation of a soldier-statesman like Yitzhak Rabin, the prime minister who signed the Oslo peace accords with the Palestinians in 1993-95 and was then murdered by a Jewish religious extremist, is the posture of Benny Gantz. In a video released this month to launch his Israel Resilience party, Mr Gantz, the army chief of staff during the 2014 war against Hamas, boasts that "parts of Gaza

[were] returned to the Stone Age" by that campaign. He is currently running second in the polls to Mr Netanyahu, who paints him as a leftist, saying: "I will not get involved in how the left plans to split up its votes."

While this bloodier-than-thou contest is distasteful, it also illustrates the ability of the solipsistic Israeli system to magic even the extreme right into the politically geometric, if not ideological, centre of the spectrum. Mr Netanyahu is not the first Israeli leader whose rightwing pedigree has faded.

The late Ariel Sharon, warrior and adventurer, and strategist of what was always intended by all Israeli governments to be the permanent colonisation of the occupied West Bank and Arab East Jerusalem, conjured himself into the off-centre of Israel's political spectrum with his Gaza gambit of 2005. He evacuated Gaza, a sliver of land populated by nearly 2m Palestinians, in which — unlike the West Bank, known to Jews as Judea and Samaria — Israel has no emotional investment.

But first Sharon militarily re-occupied the West Bank in the second Palestinian intifada from 2001. By giving up Gaza, Sharon enhanced Israel's claim to the West Bank and was able to posture as what then US president George W Bush called "a man of peace". This left Mr Netanyahu to appear as the unreconstructed extremist on Sharon's right.

Another ex-Likudnik, Tzipi Livni, former foreign minister and leader of the Sharonist party, is often painted as a firm supporter of the Palestinian state Sharon did more than anyone to make impossible. Leaked documents show that it was Ms Livni who, as chief negotiator in 2008, rebuffed a Palestinian offer that all but gave up the refugees' right of return and handed Israel all but one of the Jewish settlements in Arab East Jerusalem. In the looking-glass world of Israeli politics, she is sometimes referred to as a leftwinger, despite her inability to accept "yes" for an answer.

Mr Netanyahu surely does not seek reinvention as a centrist — above all in this election. He is a practical man, including on Hamas, which has its uses. Hamas keeps in check rival brands of Islamism in Gaza, including jihadi extremism of the Isis variety. Most of all, his attention is focused on Israel's northern borders — on Iran and its allies in Syria, and Hizbollah and its Iranian rockets in Lebanon. Threatening war in the north, the last thing he wants is a flare-up in the south.

His allies and his enemies surely know his one consistent position is Netanyahu-ist. If the past is any

guide, and with indictments hanging over him, he will find a way to burnish his rightwing credentials.

## **Benny Gantz, Contender for the Israeli Premiership, Harks Back to an Older Political Style**

**By Neil Rogachevsky**

**the-american-interest.com**

**February 5, 2019**

### **The strong, silent type.**

Whatever else he is, Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is indisputably amongst the most loquacious politicians in his country's history. Bombastic speeches at the UN, campaign speeches in historically significant locations around Israel, and televised "addresses to the nation" are the hallmark of his tenure in the Prime Minister's office.

Since his second tenure has now lasted almost ten years, it is easy to forget that many or even most Israeli political figures have disliked talking as well as talkers. A stark reminder of this side of the Israeli character has emerged with the candidacy of Benny Gantz, 59, a former chief of staff and political neophyte, who having only entered politics a few months ago has catapulted himself and his new party, Hosen Israel ("Mighty Israel"), within striking distance of Netanyahu's Likud in most major polls. Even if Gantz doesn't manage to close the gap before the April 11 election, or if he does but fails to navigate the treacherous waters of coalition building in Israel's proportionally divided Knesset, he has turned himself overnight into Netanyahu's chief rival.

Who is Benny Gantz? Most Israelis, perhaps even many of his supporters, couldn't recite more than a few lines of stock biography. A career soldier, he originally enlisted as a paratrooper and worked his way up through various branches of the IDF. Eventually, he served the mandated four-year term as Chief of Staff between 2011-2015 under none other than Benjamin Netanyahu. Gantz was notably in charge of the army during the 2014 conflict in Gaza, when Israel attacked Gaza to deter missile attacks and tunnel infiltrations by Hamas into Israel.

There has been considerable mystery about Gantz's political opinions. Is he left-wing or right-wing? Would he consider a spot in a government led by Netanyahu or he is an implacable foe? For the first few weeks of the campaign, Gantz studiously refused to say more than a few words, except, in a nod to the Trump campaign, that he would always put "Israel before all else." Finally, on Tuesday night, Gantz gave his first major speech, in which he claimed that staying quiet was not merely style but substance. "Security is created by deeds and not by words," he told supporters in Tel Aviv, "in the harsh and violent Middle East surrounding us, there is no mercy for the weak. Only the strong survive!" Promising strength and threatening Hezbollah, Hamas, and Iran, Gantz went on to indict the current government for corruption and bemoaned the alleged descent of the country into partisan politics. In a manner reminiscent of Charles de Gaulle, he pledged to stand above parties and work as a "patriot" on behalf of Israel.

Noting his almost comically exaggerated bellicosity toward Israel's enemies, Israeli commentators have argued that Gantz is a throwback right-winger from the days before Netanyahu. For while Bibi had been an elite soldier as well, his genuine political education came through diplomatic service and business, as well as his study of classic works of political economy. The "Old Likud," the argument goes, was the home to the real firebrands.

Actually, Gantz seems to represent the return of an Israeli character type never totally absent but long repressed under the Netanyahu regime: the silent general. This figure, often bred on the kibbutz and politically more at home with the Labor Party, thinks talk is cheap and detests the deal-making and prideful clucking of civilian politicians. He values simplicity, even austerity, in personal style. He is the kind of person who naturally cringes when he hears details about the Netanyahu family's luxurious life in the seaside town of Caesarea. (Gantz alluded to this in his big campaign speech). It was with such kibbutznik-warriors in mind that the late French historian François Furet memorably dubbed Israel "a new Sparta, agrarian and military."

If there is any Israeli political figure Gantz recalls, it is not a figure from the Right but the late Yitzhak Rabin, himself a war hero and chief of staff who then went into politics. Though now remembered for his impassioned but rather convoluted pleas for peace before his assassination in 1995, Rabin actually detested political rhetoric and never bothered to articulate a policy agenda. Much like Gantz, Rabin did not hesitate to threaten enemies with brutality. Benjamin Netanyahu, by contrast, prefers to argue against Iran through reasoned speeches on television and addresses in international forums.

Silent generals have done much to protect Israel since 1948. Yet, given recent history, there are good reasons to be skeptical about this approach to politics. Rabin's inability or unwillingness to articulate, in concrete terms, his approach to the peace process with the Palestinians led to much bewilderment, leaving Israelis unprepared for the diplomatic and military challenges that ensued. The late Ariel Sharon, another "strong silent" general/Prime Minister, refused to tell even his closest advisers his reasoning behind removing all Israeli settlements and troops from the Gaza Strip in 2005. Was it so that Israel would be under less pressure to leave the West Bank, or was it the first stage in a planned withdrawal from the West Bank? No one knows for sure what Sharon thought. He thus failed to mobilize the country toward any specific objective with respect to the Palestinians in Gaza. Other than releasing a television ad bragging about prior damage he inflicted on Hamas, Gantz has so far been extremely short on specifics about his views of the Palestinian

question, Iran, and other challenges. To his credit, he has said concretely that he aims to improve the overburdened hospital system. But can such vagueness lead to victory? And will it lead to successful government?

Israel's elections are still two months away. The public will inevitably learn at least a bit more about Gantz, however silent he remains. It is undeniable that Netanyahu now has the most formidable challenger on his hand in many years. And Israelis, by now used to if never quite

enamored with the speechifying Netanyahu, will have to decide whether a healthy politics requires a good dose of rhetoric about the opportunities and challenges the country faces.

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## With the Implosion of Israel's Labor Party, Expect April's Elections to Be about Personalities

By David Horovitz

timesofisrael.com

January 31, 2019

### The battle of the Benjamins.

As Gantz takes on the Rabin mantle, Israel's Labor party slides toward oblivion

In an election now clearly a battle of two Benjamins, the party that led Israel for its first 30 years is irrelevant, and it's not the only one that must merge or risk extinction

Obscured by the headlines generated Wednesday by poll figures suggesting Benny Gantz's candidacy now poses a genuine prime ministerial challenge to Benjamin Netanyahu was the same surveys' indication that the Labor party is edging toward extinction.

Gantz's Israel Resilience Party reacted to the surveys with sensible skepticism, saying it was "not ecstatic over upturns nor worried about downturns. The public will decide."

Indeed, the public will. And the pollsters' track record in predicting those decisions is not exactly stellar. Pollsters got the last US presidential elections wrong, and they were dealing with just two candidates. Their Israeli counterparts have to factor in dozens of parties, and deal with the complications posed by a pure proportional representation system, with a complex 3.25% minimum threshold mechanism. Not to mention the fact that Israeli voters may not, shock, always tell the pollsters the truth. And that surveys are often carried out in immense haste, with fairly small samples, and consequent fairly large margins of error.

So, on the one hand, we shouldn't rely on the polls. On the other, they do create certain perceptions that affect the electorate's mindset:

Now that the surveys are ostensibly showing Gantz to be a real prime ministerial contender, the public will come to regard him as a real prime ministerial contender. Now that the polls purport to show that Netanyahu may be facing the most serious challenge to his position in years, he has to contend with the perception that he's potentially in trouble, and that somewhere, for the first time, seeds of doubt may have been planted in the minds of even some of his hitherto rock-solid supporters.

If enough potential Labor voters become persuaded that the party is in terminal freefall and could disappear beneath that Knesset threshold, disappear it will

And now that Labor has purportedly plummeted from 24 seats in the outgoing Knesset (when it was allied with Tzipi Livni's Hatnua), to a paltry six seats in the surveys on

Wednesday, its leader Avi Gabbay knows that hitherto instinctive Labor voters may today be asking themselves whether a vote for Labor may be a vote that is lost altogether.

Labor was the party of David Ben-Gurion and Yitzhak Rabin. It led Israel unchallenged for the first three decades of statehood. But none of that gives it a guarantee of eternal political life. It says it has a far from negligible 60,000 fee-paying members, and it commands a polished apparatus for getting out the vote on election day. But if enough potential Labor voters become persuaded that, no, the party is in terminal freefall and could disappear beneath that Knesset threshold, disappear it will.

Unite or die

There is one expedient, however, by which Labor could all but guarantee its survival after April 9: By merging with Meretz, the only other substantial Zionist party to its left. The idea is anathema to Gabbay, who sat as a minister in Netanyahu's government when representing the Kulanu party as recently as 2016, and who has sought to draw votes from the center and right, not the further left. Meretz would doubtless recoil from such a partnership for precisely the same reasons. But Meretz is polling at a dire four seats, barely clearing the threshold and facing an even more acute threat of extinction than Labor.

The dismal poll showings of Labor and Meretz underline the collapse of the left as this election campaign gets going in earnest. Gabbay's Labor does not claim that peace is there to be made if only Israel would stretch out a warmer hand than Netanyahu's. So if Labor doesn't believe it can make peace, plenty of former Labor voters are apparently concluding, who needs it? Meretz remains adamant that a viable deal can and must be done, but evidently only a small and dwindling proportion of the electorate shares the conviction.

Numerous parties, some of them relatively well-established, are now at risk of disappearance; they serve no essential purpose

For Gabbay and Meretz's Tamar Zandberg, an alliance that both would loathe for these elections may therefore be the only means to live to fight another day. One might have suggested they reach out to Tzipi Livni's Hatnua while they're about it. She's gone from within touching distance of the prime ministership, after Ehud Olmert

resigned 10 years ago, to polling far below the threshold today. But I suspect Livni would rather accept her fate than have anything further to do with Gabbay, who brutally uncoupled the Labor-Hatnua alliance a month ago, live on TV, as Livni sat, unwarned, in total shock alongside him.

The imperative to unite is not confined to the left, however. The surveys' potentially self-fulfilling predictions show numerous parties, some of them relatively well-established, now at risk of disappearance — marginalized in part because of the rise of Gantz, but mainly because they serve no essential purpose.

The United States trundles along with two main groupings for its 240 million or so eligible voters; the United Kingdom's mother of parliaments has various minor parties but only two real heavyweights. Most of Israel's new one-man parties (yes, they are almost all led by men, ex-military men in several cases) will fail by miles to reach the Knesset, but some of the veteran parties should and may have to team up as well.

It's not left or right; it's Benjamin or Benny

While Israeli political infighting is vicious, ideological differences have narrowed. Everybody would love peace; very few people believe it is attainable. This is not 1999, when Netanyahu told Israelis there was no chance of a historic accord with the Palestinians, and Ehud Barak ousted him because he convinced enough voters — wrongly, as it turned out — that there was.

This election is unlikely to be a battle over left and right — no matter how hard Likud tries to make it so. It will rather be a choice of personalities — between a vastly experienced prime minister, widely respected for having protected Israel from without, and a neophyte ex-army chief arguing that this same prime minister is tearing Israel apart from within

Ultimately, this election is unlikely to be a battle over left and right — no matter how hard Likud tries to make it

so, and to depict Gantz as a weak man of the left. It will rather be a choice of personalities — between a vastly experienced prime minister, widely respected for having protected Israel from without, and a neophyte ex-army chief arguing that this same prime minister is tearing Israel apart from within. Between an incumbent who warns of a bleak future without him in a treacherous region, and a contender promising that, for all the very real threats, things can be a great deal better.

Netanyahu's opponents have claimed — with increasing ferocity as the corruption investigations against him have progressed — that the man is a menace. But as I wrote here in December 2017, that argument was undermined by the fact that, for all the ostensible danger, his would-be successors were all too egotistical at the time to unite in order to tackle him, which suggested to the electorate that perhaps the danger was not so acute, after all. Now one of the prime minister's principal critics, ex-Likud defense minister and chief of staff Moshe Ya'alon, has thrown in his lot with Gantz — albeit at a time when Ya'alon's Telem party was otherwise going nowhere.

While we wait to see if Gantz and Yesh Atid's Yair Lapid will resolve their clash of personal leadership ambitions in the shared cause of defeating Netanyahu, Gabbay has missed his chance for an alliance with the centrists, who regard Labor as a liability. The historic party of government is a victim of a toxic and unpredictable regional climate and a party leadership that failed to move with those times. It is Gantz, not Gabbay, who has taken on Yitzhak Rabin's skeptical, straight-talking mantle, with the same chief-of-staff credibility to go with it.

Labor and most everybody else are mere adjuncts to these elections, which have now indeed become, as I suggested in December that they would, "A Battle of Two Benjamins."

## Default settings: Lebanon's caretaker government has edged it towards economic crisis

By The Economist

economist.com

January 31, 2019

**Its economy is growing slowly and is overburdened by debt.**

Pity the finance minister who must instil confidence in Lebanon, which has the fifth-highest public-debt burden in the world, at 150% of GDP. But Ali Hassan Khalil did a staggeringly poor job of it when he told a local newspaper his country was ready to default. "It's true that the ministry is preparing a plan for financial correction, including a restructuring of public debt," he said in an interview published on January 10th. Within a day its bonds fell to a record low. Mr Khalil soon clarified that he meant rescheduling, not restructuring. For ratings agencies the distinction is moot. On January 21st Moody's downgraded Lebanon's bonds even deeper into junk.

In a normal country, one banker mused, Mr Khalil's comments might be a sackable offence. Lebanon is not a

normal country. Nine months after the first parliamentary election in nine years, nobody has formed a government. The prime minister-designate, Saad Hariri, is stuck in a dispute with six Sunni MPs aligned with Hizbullah, the powerful Shia militia-cum-party. Parliament is frozen. There is no budget for 2019. Even if Mr Hariri wanted to fire his finance minister, doing so would lead to weeks of haggling over a replacement.

This is hardly Lebanon's worst political jam. From 2005 to 2017 parliament could not pass a budget. But it comes at a time of looming economic crisis as well. Since 2010 GDP growth has averaged less than 2% a year. Inflation hit 7.6% in 2018, its highest in five years. The purchasing managers' index fell from 46.7 to 46.2 in December. A figure below 50 suggests a contraction; Lebanon has not crossed above that threshold since 2013.

The chamber of commerce says about 2,200 firms closed last year. New construction has slowed and an estimated \$9bn worth of properties are empty.

With politics in disarray, the central bank drives economic policy. It borrows billions from commercial banks to prop up the Lebanese pound against the dollar. Foreign-currency deposits must grow by 6-7% annually if it is to defend the peg, reckons the IMF. In the 11 months to November 2018, the last month for which data are available, banks' holdings of foreign currency increased by just 4%. Not all of that is new money, either. Customers seem to have converted 3.9trn pounds (\$2.6bn) to dollar accounts. The central bank has ordered firms like Western Union to stop paying out money transfers in dollars.

Optimists wave this away with breezy talk of Lebanon's "resilience" and hope that wealthy Gulf patrons will come to the rescue. Qatar stepped in after Mr Khalil's blunder and promised to buy \$500m in Lebanese bonds, which helped stabilise the market. Not to be outdone by his Gulf rival, the Saudi finance minister pledged to "support Lebanon all the way", though he offered no

details. But half a billion is a pittance for a country with \$49bn in outstanding dollar bonds. Resilience does not pay creditors.

In January the finance ministry released a study from McKinsey, a consultancy, with advice on fixing the economy. Though some of its ideas are unrealistic, a few are common sense. Tourism and agriculture have room to grow. Lebanon's well-educated population could export services or create tech startups. The country also stands to gain from reconstruction in war-ravaged Syria.

But all the suggestions rest on the government fixing infrastructure, such as unreliable electricity and some of the world's worst internet connections. Foreign donors offered to help at a conference in Paris last year, pledging \$11bn in mostly concessional loans. But the money will not flow until Lebanon has a government. Ministers warn that donors are ready to take their cash elsewhere. That would be another blow to investor confidence—though at least that would be one debt Mr Khalil would not have to worry about.

## Lebanon's New Government Shows Hizbollah's Dominance

By Tony Badran

fdd.org

February 1, 2019

**The U.S. should adjust its policies accordingly.**

After a nine-month delay, Lebanon has a new government. Hezbollah's dominance of the government is not restricted to the various ministries it or its allies control. Rather, the government formation process itself is evidence of how Hezbollah dominates Lebanon – a consequential fact for U.S. policy.

Following its victory in the May 2018 parliamentary election, Hezbollah began orchestrating the formation of a new government. From the outset, the terror group laid out its non-negotiable demands and immediately received the acquiescence of Prime Minister-designate, Saad Hariri. Namely, Hezbollah wanted to control the lucrative Ministry of Public Health. It succeeded. The new minister, Jamil Jabak, reportedly is the former personal physician of Hezbollah's secretary general, Hassan Nasrallah.

Then Hezbollah proceeded to manage the shares of the other sects and parties. The Lebanese Forces, a Christian party, gained seats in the election but Hezbollah marginalized it in the government formation process. Instead of obtaining the Defense portfolio, Hezbollah made sure that ministry went to one of their allies, Elias Bou Saab.

Hezbollah similarly managed the Druze share. Hezbollah forced Druze chieftain Walid Jumblatt to give up one of the three allocated seats to a figure approved by Jumblatt's rival, Talal Arslan, an ally of both Hezbollah and Syria's Bashar al-Assad.

Hezbollah also demanded that Hariri offer a share in the government to a bloc of pro-Hezbollah and pro-Assad

Sunnis. Not only did Hezbollah force the inclusion of an anti-Hariri Sunni minister, but it also forced its Christian ally, President Michel Aoun, and Aoun's son-in-law and foreign minister, Gebran Bassil, to vacate a slot from their share. In so doing, Hezbollah stripped any one party, even allies, of the ability to veto government decisions independently.

Hezbollah now controls a majority coalition of all the Lebanese sects. The government formation process demonstrated clearly how Hezbollah actually runs the entire political order, underscoring the reality that Lebanon and Hezbollah are, in effect, synonymous.

U.S. policy should reflect this reality. It should abandon the fiction that by "strengthening state institutions" it somehow weakens Hezbollah. Instead, the Trump administration should freeze all assistance to the Lebanese Armed Forces. Moreover, U.S. law requires imposing sanctions on agencies and instrumentalities of foreign states that move money to Hezbollah. Lebanon's Ministry of Public Health now fits this category. The U.S. should thus block international funds to the ministry. While the Lebanese will surely protest that the new minister is not technically a card-carrying member of Hezbollah, there is no doubt as to whom he represents. There is similarly little doubt that Hezbollah will staff the ministry. Washington must act accordingly.

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## Indictment for a Senseless Death

By Editorial Op-Ed

Late on an autumn Shabbos night last year, a Palestinian couple and one of their children, a 9-year-old girl, were driving near the Shomron community of Rehelim, when a four-pound stone smashed through their car's windshield and struck the mother, 47-year-old Aisha Al-Rabi, in the head.

As a result of the attack, the vehicle skidded and overturned, injuring both parents seriously. The mother, 48, later died of her wounds in the hospital.

Last week, Israeli prosecutors filed an indictment against one of five boys from a nearby institution, Yeshivat Pri Ha'aretz, who had initially been detained on suspicion of throwing stones at Arab vehicles that night, October 12. The indictment against the accused youth, who is still a minor and therefore has not been publicly identified, is for manslaughter in the course of committing an act of terror. The act, the indictment charged, was committed "with no concern for the possibility that someone could die as a result."

Evidence cited by prosecutors, it was reported, includes DNA that matches the boy's found on the rock that hit the vehicle.

The Shin Bet, Israel's internal security agency, had been accused of using heavy-handed tactics in the pursuit of the investigation against the youths, who were held in custody for many days without access to attorneys, and who were threatened, it was alleged, with violence in order to coax them to make confessions. If it turns out that unduly harsh methods were used by the agency in the absence of any "ticking bomb" concerns, that violation of citizens' rights needs to be addressed.

But what also needs to be addressed, whether or not the evidence against the indicted youth proves dispositive, is the unfortunate fact that some feel it is justified to commit acts of violence against Arabs who have posed no threat to them, like this most recent attack and the 2015 firebombing of a Palestinian home in Duma, which killed three family members, including an 18-month-old baby.

Klal Yisrael is charged with being an exemplary people among the nations of the world. And part of that designation means rejecting ugly acts — like throwing stones at innocents, a staple of Arab "demonstrations" — routinely committed by others. When individuals among us adopt the repulsive and violent methods of other societies and peoples, it is not only an abdication of our Divine charge but provides our enemies fodder for claiming that we are no different from them. To call that a chillul Hashem is no overstatement.

Even from a practical perspective, is there some gain

hamodia.com

January 27, 2019

to be had by acting like the worst of our enemies? There are still places where Jews and Arabs of good will live in proximity and harmony. Irresponsible acts, even when they don't involve harm to innocents, do violence to such comity. That truth must be conveyed to all of our young in no uncertain terms.

Ironically, Klal Yisrael's specialness was demonstrated in this recent tragic case, in the actions of Israel herself.

From September 2000 through September 2017, Palestinians killed 813 Israeli civilians, including 135 children, in suicide bombings, shootings and stabbings. Those murders were greeted in some Palestinian circles with rejoicing, praises for the war criminal "martyrs" and their enshrinement as heroes on posters and even in school textbooks.

Even more restrained Palestinian groups have offered justifications for the willful killings of innocents, explaining that what they consider to be an illegal "occupation" and illegal "settlements" are reason enough to murder men, women and children.

Palestinians who were involved with the 2001 Sbarro bombing, as well as the family of the perpetrator, have been given hundreds of thousands of dollars by the Palestinian Authority since the attack.

When 45-year-old father of four Ari Fuld was fatally stabbed at a shopping mall near Efrat by a Palestinian this past September, several Palestinian organizations labeled the murder a "natural response to Zionist crimes." Hamas hailed it as a "heroic stabbing operation."

In the starkest contrast imaginable, when an Israeli teenager, who may well never have imagined a tragic outcome to his repulsive act of vandalism, caused the death of an innocent person, Israel's law enforcement agencies did not hesitate to pursue every lead and arrest suspects, treating them no differently from any other suspected criminals. And, when a thorough investigation yielded evidence, the authorities duly indicted the boy on a most serious charge.

We hope that the future will show that the youth had no intent of harming, much less killing, another human being. But one thing is certain: Israel acted decisively, without tolerance for wanton violence, whoever the perpetrator. And the world, including parts of it that exult in the spilling of innocent Jewish blood, was shown an example of a responsible actor on the global scene.

Reports about the investigation and indictment appeared in Al Jazeera, the Jordan Times and other Arab media. Their readers were shown that example no less. We can only hope they gave it some thought.

## A Papal Visit to the United Arab Emirates Bodes Well for the Region, and for Israel

By Sohrab Ahmari

nypost.com

February 4, 2019

A model for tolerance in a sea of radicalism.

"On the peninsula of the Arabs, two religions shall not co-exist." So runs a saying traditionally attributed to Omar

iibn al-Khattab, one of the Prophet Muhammad's closest companions and Islam's second caliph. Omar's commandment, and others like it, have justified the

Muslim faith's exclusive supremacy on the peninsula for more than 1,400 years.

Well, so much for that.

On Sunday, Pope Francis became the first Catholic pontiff to visit Abu Dhabi, the glittering capital of the United Arab Emirates. In our social-media age, with its endless parade of fleeting images, it's easy to overlook the significance of this: The vicar of Christ has arrived in Islam's birthplace — sandy terrain from which Muslims once violently extirpated rival religions.

More than that, Francis is here to celebrate the Mass, the ancient Christian liturgy in which the creator of the universe makes himself mysteriously present under the appearance of bread and wine, per Catholic belief. "For where two or three gather in my name," Jesus told his followers, "there am I in the midst of them." The papal Mass here is expected to draw 120,000 faithful.

The invitation to the Holy Father solidifies the UAE's status as the most responsible power in the Persian Gulf region. And it gives testament to the Emirati leadership's determination to transcend the bloody, cruel fanaticism that has disfigured the House of Islam and brought ruin to Christians and other minorities unfortunate enough to dwell inside it.

The Emirates' openness is palpable when you visit the Dubai Mall, where vastly different modes of life — local women with veiled faces, Eastern European tourists with plunging necklines and perilously short skirts, manbun-sporting Arab hipsters and kippah-wearing Orthodox Jews — overlap in safety and peace.

That same civilizational confidence is apparent at the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, the ginormous, Aladdin-style edifice devoted to glorifying Allah — as well as the Emirates' visionary founder, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan. Where else in the Muslim world can you find a mosque that makes a point of putting interfaith outreach at the forefront of its activities? Or a mosque festooned with pictures of the pope and other Christian leaders?

A reform vision defines the UAE's geopolitical posture as well. Threatened by the expansionist Tehran regime, Abu Dhabi (along with Riyadh) has forged a strategic partnership with Jerusalem that is the region's worst-kept secret. But in the UAE's case, the ties go

beyond "The enemy of my enemy is my friend." Since 2010, three Israeli cabinet ministers have visited the UAE to discuss infrastructure, energy and sports.

As Zaki Nusseibeh, a minister of state and adviser to the late Sheikh Zayed, told me: "There is no enmity between us and the state of Israel."

Opinion polling suggests that the UAE leadership's enlightened attitudes have begun to filter down to the populace. A YouGov survey conducted ahead of the pope's visit found that Emiratis are much less likely to be concerned if a close relative marries a Christian than their neighbors in Saudi Arabia and Egypt would be. And while only about a third of Egyptians and Saudis expressed fears about Islamic extremism, more than half of Emiratis did. YouGov concluded: "UAE results overall are often nearer to that of Western samples than to fellow" Mideast nations "when it comes to general attitudes to world religions."

Yes, UAE openness befits a federation of commercial city-states, but Westerners tempted to sneer should ask themselves: Which is preferable, the joyful materialism of nouveaux riches Emiratis — or the extremism of the Muslim Brotherhood, Islamic State, Hezbollah, Hamas and other groups of the kind? Which is better for Christians and other regional minorities, not to mention Arabs themselves?

And true, the country isn't any sort of liberal democracy. Virtually all UAE Muslims, for example, hear the same sermon at Friday prayers — one drafted by a government-approved committee charged with countering radicalism. That goes against every liberal instinct in the West's bones, but if it means fewer ISIS atrocities here or in our homelands, I'll take it. The common good isn't always and everywhere served by our form of government.

That's an idea the Catholic Church understands deeply, having endured all sorts of powers and principalities for two millennia. Western NGOs and reporters who expect Francis to fulminate against this or that injustice while he's here forget that the pope brings the deepest reform message of all: the good news of Jesus Christ.

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## Amnesty International's Campaign against Tourism to Israel

By NGO Monitor

ngo-monitor.org

January 29, 2019

**An attempt to ignore the history of Judaism and Christianity.**

On January 30, 2019, Amnesty International published "The Tourism Industry and Israeli Settlements," a report alleging that "the Israeli government has political and ideological reasons for developing a tourism industry in occupied East Jerusalem and Area C of the West Bank." According to Amnesty, "Israel has constructed many of its settlements close to archaeological sites ... [as] part of an

active campaign to normalize and legitimize Israel's increasing control of the OPT."

In this publication and the broader campaign, which is also designed to bolster the expected UN BDS blacklist, Amnesty denies Jewish connections to historical sites — including in the Old City of Jerusalem — and in essence faults Israel for preserving Jewish historical and cultural heritage, as well as places that are holy to Christians.

**Denying Jewish Historical Connection to Holy Sites**

Amnesty repeatedly diminishes Jewish connections to holy sites in the Old City of Jerusalem and in other areas of religious and historical importance to Jews. Amnesty accuses Israel of creating a “settlement tourism industry” to help “sustain and expand” communities beyond the 1949 Armistice line. Israel’s interest in Jewish archaeology is “to make the link between the modern State of Israel and its Jewish history explicit,” while “rewriting of history [which] has the effect of minimizing the Palestinian people’s own historic links to the region.”

In Amnesty’s antisemitic narrative, the Israeli government and others “use [] archaeology and tourism as cover for removing the Palestinian residents of Silwan and installing settlers,” and “the settlers in Hebron see tourism as one way of strengthening their position. For political and financial reasons, they want as many people as possible to visit them.” Similarly, online tourism websites that list such sites are portrayed as complicit in these same motives.

The possibility that Jews would visit holy sites and want to see archaeological remnants of biblical locations for their religious and historical significance is not entertained.

#### **Erasing Christian Holy Sites in Jerusalem**

Amnesty notes that “The top three most visited places by foreign tourists in 2017 were all in Jerusalem’s Old City,” suggesting that this is a serious problem that needs to be solved. Only in a footnote do we learn that these are “the Western Wall, the Jewish Quarter and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.”

Amnesty also complains that the “financial benefits both to Israel and to businesses operating in occupied territory ...is because most foreign visitors also enter the OPT.”

By suggesting that foreign tourism to Israel is about supporting settlements, not about religious and/or historical interest, Amnesty International erases the Christian connection to the Holy Land.

#### **Ideology Instead of Research Methodology**

As with most Amnesty publications, there is no meaningful research methodology, and the resulting analysis reflects this. Throughout, Amnesty makes claims based on unverifiable testimonies, provides statistics out of context, and attacks tourism companies for alleged violations without any systematic analysis of their activities. There is almost no original research, with most factual claims sourced to NGO and UN publications (see below). An illustrative example of Amnesty’s misleading factual claims concerns the Dead Sea. Amnesty quotes statistics from the Israeli government that “45% of foreign visitors went to the Dead Sea, much of which is in the OPT.” While the northern parts of the Dead Sea abut the West

Bank, the primary tourist attractions (such as the Ein Gedi nature reserve, Masada, and the resorts in Ein Bokek) are located within Israel’s pre-1967 borders. Amnesty’s inclusion of ultimately irrelevant information reflects its tendentious goals and lack of basic knowledge of the topic area.

Amnesty also relies on anonymous and unverified interviews. For instance, in discussing the threat of home demolitions in Silwan, Amnesty states that “In this resident’s opinion, the Israeli government was using the fines as a way of forcing people to vacate al-Bustan. “They are trying to make us leave” (emphasis added). Amnesty also relies on an unconfirmed interview with a family to claim that as soldiers arrested their son, “they threw stun grenades to disperse family members who were peacefully following them” (emphasis added).

Amnesty further accuses companies such as Airbnb, TripAdvisor, Expedia.com, Hotels.com, and Booking.com of contributing to “human rights violations” without systematically reviewing the activities of these companies. Instead, Amnesty selectively and on an ad-hoc basis points to a tourist destination review or a rental property listing as grounds for accusing the company of being somehow complicit in a host of human rights violations. The long list of human rights concerns are unrelated to the companies and tourism industries mentioned in the report, such as “violations of” the “right to life,” “freedom of expression,” “rights of the child,” and “right to education.” Indeed, it is unclear how a Jewish individual visiting the Western Wall in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem would somehow be guilty of such violations, or how a tourism website advertising this would also somehow be complicit.

#### **Reliance on Politicized and BDS NGOs**

Not surprisingly, Amnesty International relies on a number of pro-BDS organizations and other political NGOs to support its arguments against Jews preserving and visiting Jewish historical sites in the West Bank. These organizations include the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) terror-tied NGOs Defense for Children International – Palestine (DCI-P) and Al-Haq; the pro-BDS NGOs Who Profits, EAPPI, Human Rights Watch, and Diakonia; and Israeli political advocacy NGOs B’Tselem, Emek Shaveh, Kerem Navot, Ir Amim, and Yesh Din.

Amnesty also relies on documents published by various UN agencies known for their hostility to Israel, including UNOCHA, OHCHR, and the Human Rights Council. These agencies and their reports regularly cite the same NGOs relied on by Amnesty in its report, further reinforcing the bias.